

Experiencing ‘Sher-e-Khas’: an Urban Palimpsest of the Walled City, Bhopal, India

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Abstract

The city of Bhopal renders a tranquil image; the vast upper lake, its edges bordered with lush greens meeting the edge of the city in a tumultuous skyline and the twin minarets of the Taj-ul-Masjid impart a unique identity. A generalized public image of any given city is an overlap of many individual images. In the case of Bhopal, till date, the soul of the city lies within the walled city; the Sher-e-Khas, known today as the old city of Bhopal. Its spatial experience is both unique and exhilarating.

Indeed, Sher-e-Khas is alluring with a plethora of layers waiting to be explored. The narrow curvilinear streets opening into small open spaces against a dense built fabric of exquisite architectural detail is rich in aural experiences. The sound of the ‘namaaz’ from the overhead Minarets and temple bells clanging from the evening puja, the honking of the auto rickshaws in the gullies among the throng of people shopping from the colorful bazaar, all contribute to a joyful mayhem. In fact, it can be said that it lies in a state of constant productive chaos. As Jacob said, respect strips of chaos that have wisdom of their own not yet encompassed in our concept of urban order. In this sense, the old city would give an impression of a place where the concept of boundaries to distinguish spaces are blurred to allow mutual coexistence of diverse socio-cultural elements, the physical enclosure acting as a stimulus for the life and its interactions. The space: the grid planned city along with its local distinctiveness and cultural vibrancy slowly undergoes transmogrification each day of the year.

This research examines this joyful chaos present in the city. It also re-discovers some of the lost or forgotten layers of this historic city, which has a heritage value of more than four centuries. It employs qualitative methods and particularly an in-depth phenomenological inquiry. It delves deep into tangible and intangible elements to holistically arrive at the identity of the place and to rediscover few of the lost and forgotten public spaces that could be given rebirth with the intention of re vitalizing the area. The study is conducted through acute observations, and analysis of the various layers – the historic layer, the physical layer, the socio-cultural layer, the quality and nature of life – the activity.

It concludes that most of the buildings there today are merely pale imitations of modern buildings and that no distinct architectural style can be observed. Nevertheless, the spirit of place is still intact in the sense that the density of the built fabric renders a very human scale to the pedestrians. Indeed, it offers a joyful blend of sounds, vistas, visual chaos as well as unique fragrances and tactile experiences.

Keywords: Layers, Experience, Image, Walled city, Bhopal, urban chaos India

Introduction

Experiencing a city takes place at different levels of bodily engagement and knowledge. On the one hand, one may walk through the spaces, experience its visual appearances, sounds and smells as well as the tactility of things including the ground earth. These will come from the material things, as well as non-material existence such as ambience, which may be produced by the weather as well as the presence or the absence of the people. However, such experiences are also couch in knowledge which arises from the information gained about the place either before during or after experience. In fact, a huge complexity arises when one begins to come across the history of a place.

Understanding the transformation of any given landscape requires a study of the past; how the place was formed, structured, who inhabited it and what memories it has. In the tug of war between memory of space and progress, the identity of any place becomes debatable.

With the advent of modernization, many of the Indian cities have shed their past and are adopting more westernized appearances. In the process, sometimes, memory and identity of the landscape is lost. In fact, the creation of this new city fabric gives rise to placelessness; a kind of experience that is devoid of meaning and does not enable a person to construct any relations with the spaces and places of the city.



Fig. 1: Taj-ul-Masjid;
Source: Bhopal Travel Guide

The quintessential Indian city is the result of overlaying of various facets encompassing time, history, culture, people, traditions and developments. Cities with their public and private spaces, their intersections, gardens, museums, architectural character, and material selection include overlaying traces of a historical past that still exist in the present. Hence, an urban landscape can also be seen as a palimpsest. Here, the layers of the past are merged with the sections of the present, traces of culture, politics, identity that are written, rewritten and erased in an open-ended and continuously unfolding process giving form to the current city. The identity of the city as a whole is sculpted with the natural topographical features of its location and overlaying it with a succession of layers such as culture, economy, philosophy, religion, politics etc. defined by time. It is the nature of interactions between these layers that give the present city its form and structure, which has been essentially a symbiotic role of four factors – people, place, time and technology.

The transformation of the Indian cities has occurred in different phases and Bhopal is no exception. Historically, the city has undergone these phases based on the ideas that have prevailed during particular times. Like a piece of art with its distinct strata, each layer of it possesses a unique identity. Today, an increasing number of pedestrian spaces and public activity spaces are being taken over by vehicular parking, unhygienic disposal of organic waste and garbage on the side of the streets and illegal encroachments by hawkers. These undeniably contribute to an undesirable experience of this once cherished city. All the activities have made the experience of walking along the streets seemingly unpleasant, unhealthy and unsafe.

In this context, this paper examines the experiences of ‘Sher-e- Khas’: the walled city, Bhopal, India from the past to the present. Its aim is to re-discover places from within the city as potential people-centric interactive spaces that can be given re-birth so that the city will gain a profound experience. Such spaces would effectively revitalize the streets and would greatly improve the active pedestrian movement and promote the health and safety of the public spaces. For this purpose, the paper revisits the old streets to discover their inherent experiences. Its objectives are:

1. To unearth the different layers that constitute the urban built and social fabric of the Sher-e-Khas region of Bhopal.
2. To understand the various social, political, demographical and cultural factors that have played roles in the transformation and how the quality of life has varied over time with these changes.
3. To identify the public spaces of the region, both existing and lost spaces, which play/ have played an important part of the life and activity of the people; Public spaces which hosted activity that contributed to the identity of the place.
4. To reveal why these activities and spaces have disappeared, and if it indeed is necessary to revive them for the improvisation of the quality of public life.
5. To revisit the street as the first and basic level of public space of the old city and identify the role it plays in the health and safety of the public.
6. To propose solutions and recommendations to improve the quality of life with the street as the most economical and central element to revitalize the city as a more experientially rich, pedestrian-friendly and human-centric region.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The study takes its genesis from the collective memory that any city produces in the minds of its residents: readers. This perception has been studied by many architects, planners, and sociologists and they have interpreted the city, the physical, visual and active elements which make it, shape it and give it its unique character. Among them, Lynch (1960) stands out. Indeed, Lynch (1960) focuses on the components of a city that are used to build order into its structure. He elaborates on the concept of origin of city and their forms: the city as a machine, the sacred city and the city as an organism. Furthermore, he distills the components of a city down to five: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. He argues that the network of relationships between these basic components builds the armature for the mental model of a city. According to Lynch, these elements may not be dominant or iconic, but may help in rendering a space legible for its users. Hence, this helps us in identifying the visual as well as physical elements in any city which would act as markers representing the individuality of the place.

At the same time Sennett (2008) also talks about cities and how their planning should make them open and permeable. He thereby deals with the topic of edges, wherein he mentions that edges should be ambiguous in nature for them to be more socially and culturally viable. Jane Jacobs (1961) says that “if density and diversity give life, the life they breed is disorderly.” Thus, she says that an open city like Naples, would stimulate one with richer cultural transactions around its edges. A closed city would feel like Frankfurt.

Indeed, Sennett (2008) has been inspired by Jacobs’s (1961) ideology and brings to designer’s attention the role of the perimeter to make them conscious of their participation in the creation of territories, boundaries and borders. He proposes that it is at the edges of territories that public spaces can exist or emerge. A distinction is made between borders and boundaries – boundaries being limits or edges which separate one territory from another and borders being a zone of interactive edges between the territories. The life of an area actually converts any given space into a place comprised of all the sensual experiences: visual, tactile, aural, and olfactory.

On the other hand, Jacobs (1961) also throws light on the physical elements which shape any place. Through great streets, she brings to light the importance of the movement corridors. In doing so, she helps to analyze and quantify the visceral reactions of wonder and pleasure that one experience through the public realm of a city-streets, the squares, the parks, and the plazas etc.

In *Great Streets*, Jacobs (1961) analyzes the qualities of great streets - buildings of similar heights, interesting facades, landscapes, eyes-on the street, intersections, stopping places and spaces for leisurely walking. By studying great streets in-depth, she has identified the factors which help in transforming streets into better public places: places that are cherished because they touch the hearts of people by offering a composite of pleasurable sensual experiences.

Adding to these, Fitrianty et al. (2025) show how facades also contribute to the aesthetics and experiences of cities. They examine the visual perceptions of building facades in Taman Ismail Marzuki as a reflection of the city Image of Jakarta, Indonesia. They point out that the aspects of the facades such as architectural style, as well as the elements such as walls, sun shading, and ornaments contribute to the dominant building characters that shape the image and experience of a city.

Similarly, Hirudini and Chandrasekara (2025) show that public places possess a sensuality which they call 'sense of co-presence' by examining the Independence Square of Colombo, Sri Lanka. They reveal that six main architectural parameters: accessibility, layout, permeability, level of light and shade, sense of security and the activity patterns are significant factors in creating such an experience. They argue that these determine the quality of visual interactions that significantly influence the sense of co-presence in an urban public place. Indeed, they conclude that if the visual interactions are low, the occupancy rate of the public place decreases, in spite of any high level of physical comfort provided through architectural design.

There are also other aspects that matter. For example, Mukherjee (2025) adds that urban developments also influence historical character both positively and negatively. Moreover, Tumur (2026) points out that geometry also plays a role in spatial experience. As can be seen, these theoretical ideas provide wholesome theoretical perspectives to understand the experience of cities particularly those that possess complex layers of history. Among these, images, facades, and the movements through streets arise as the most significant facets that produce spatial experiences.

Research Methodology

The research uses a qualitative study of the tangible and intangible elements of the public spaces of the city: 'Sher-e- Khas,' Bhopal, India. It particularly employs first-person phenomenological methods. Immersing in the site of through a walking survey enables first-hand primary reading of the site. However, the old city is not similar to any other part of the city; hence effective comparisons cannot be drawn to formulate a strategy for improving the area. Instead, the old city is being treated as a city by itself: self-sufficient in its own way with a strong, unmistakable cultural and historic background offering a unique experience.

The research also employs qualitative heuristic phenomenological method. In other words, it examines the second-hand accounts of the experiences of the city delineated from published books, documentaries, journalistic commentaries etc. The overall structure of research is divided into 3 parts.

- **Act 1-** literature study and theoretical framework on the topic- aided by published books, articles, journals, projects
- **Act 2 –** Primary site and context study- Discussions with the residents and experiencing the city first hand.
- **Act 3-** Combine the individual observation to reach at an analysis matrix of the character and place study of Sher-e-khas, which would help in laying down design guidelines.

The Case Study: Bhopal, the Walled city: A Brief History

The First Layer

In the first task, the author walked through the city experiencing the nuances of its spaces and places through first-hand experience. This includes looking at, listening, touching and experiencing the multitude of fragrances, while stopping and talking to people and understanding their perceptions. Dass has articulated similar sentiments as follows.

“Sprawled across the Vindhya and Singarcholi mountains is the beautiful city of lakes – Bhopal. Spanning 20-25 km across, Bhopal is a well-planned, fast developing city. Wide roads, lush greenery, luxuriant urban spaces and modern buildings in a continuous, undulating terrain make up its beautiful cityscape. Adding romance to this environment are the lakes of Bhopal. The largest and the oldest of these lakes, supplies the city with water – the Upper Lake, commonly known as ‘*Bara Talab*’ (Hindi for Big Lake), constitutes the thousand-year-old heritage of the city. Holding this lake is the equally ancient dam – King Bhoja’s Dam, a reminder that Bhopal’s origins lay in a far-sighted environmental management that has stood the test of time. In the heart of the city today, lie many such silent documents of the history of Bhopal – many of them in a ruined, unattended and uncared-for state.”

Dass, 2011: 84

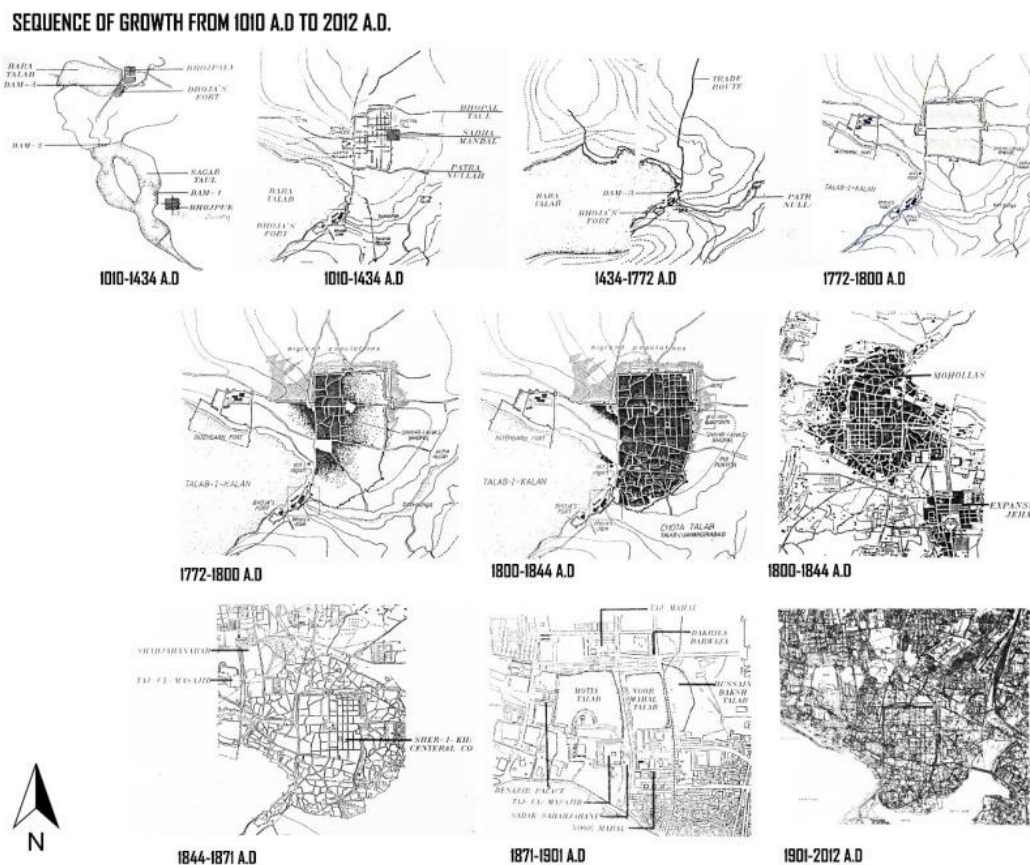


Fig. 2: Evolution of Bhopal city;
Source: National Archives of India, TT Nagar, Bhopal

However, while that experience gathers momentum, let us look at the first layer of that city and its spaces: the historical strata underneath.

According to literature, during the reign of King Bhoj, Bhopal had become an important guardian city to the water body Bara *Talab* referred to as the Upper Lake today with the fortified grid iron city of Bhojpalsituated at the East of the lake. About 35 km. towards the South-east of Bhojpal has existed its sister city called Bhojpur. The city under king Bhoj has bustled with trade and commerce and has led to its becoming the capital. The fortified Bhopal city, also called ‘Sher-e-Khas’, enclosed an area of 1.5 sq. km. with a city wall that was 10 meter high, 2-3 m. thick and 1.2 km. in total length. Quite a lot of civic construction has taken place during this period, resulting in a varied and sophisticated urban fabric.

It is likely that people paid taxes for these constructions such as the fort wall, ‘*hammams*’, ‘*hathikhannas*’, ‘*serais*’ and the mosques. The ‘*Hammam*’ was a public bathing area with many windowless chambers. The ‘*Serais*’ were structures where the visiting merchants have been given shelter during their business visits to the city. The ‘*hathikhanna*’ was an enclosure similar in form to the ‘*serai*’. It was meant for housing the elephants and their ‘*mahaots*’ (Hindi for elephant keeper). The streets were narrow, the maximum width being 4m. The buildings on the street sides rose to three to four floors giving a strong sense of enclosure to the streets. The ‘*pattias*’ (Hindi for platform in the front of a house used as a sit-out) of various buildings matched each other in an orderly manner. People have spread out on to these ‘*pattias*’ in the evening and these had become the centers of daily social intercourse and gossip. Another meeting point for the residents of Bhopal has been the ‘*akhara*.’ An Indian version of the gymnasium, the ‘*akharas*’ have had mud pits and other facilities for physical training and fitness (Dass, 2011).

In the Muslim ruled India, Islam has found the ‘Masjid’ as a way to dominate the urban landscape. The Masjid for various purposes has been built in different scales and grandeur. During the British reign however, apart from the construction of colonial structures, many Muslim dominant states have also seen the construction of mosques. The British have encouraged the elite rulers of princely states to realize the vision of a progressive and modern India.

Among the 500 Princely states that existed during the British Colonial India, Bhopal has been the second most important Muslim state after Hyderabad where the elite rulers professed Islam while the laity consisted of predominantly Hindus. In an era where politics of the state was dominated by the elite male, Bhopal has seen the rise of *Begums* in succession to shape the capital into a culturally vibrant city before the last of these women abdicated her throne in favor of her son (Sharma, 2014)

The *Begums* have worked tirelessly to modernize their state and have recorded their endeavors with equal enthusiasm. According to Ali, prior to the uprising, Qudsiya *Begum* has commissioned a waterworks system for Bhopal city with British assistance (Ali, 1969). Following this, the successors have worked upon improving the state road network, have introduced railways and have promoted the construction of public buildings such as schools and hospitals apart from building palaces and gardens for personal use.

Under Sultan Jahan*Begum*’s extensive patronage of improvement works, a new cultural landscape of banks, women’s clubs, schools, a public library, a museum and courts have emerged in Bhopal in keeping with the metropolitan ideal. The favored architectural style has been the Indo Saracenic that was regarded and recommended by the colonial state as the most appropriate style for building in princely India post 1857. In the 1870s the state was topographically surveyed under the Bhopal and Malwa Survey, while Bhopal city was municipalized in 1903 thus further bolstering the cause of urban improvement (Sharma, 2014). The *Begums* of Bhopal went on to build the three most important mosques in Bhopal: Qudsiya*Begum*’s Jami Masjid (1833); Sikander*Begum*’s Moti Masjid (1847) and Shahjahan*Begum*’s Taj- ul Masjid (post 1871)

Hence, the transition from the rise and fall of the Parmara Dynasty and undergoing subsequent cultural and architectural change under the rule of the Nawabs during the 18th century has resulted in an architectural style that has helped define the city and establish itself as the capital of Madhya Pradesh.

Sher-e-Khas

History shows that the old city of Bhopal (Sher-e-Khas) has witnessed several transformations in its density, architecture, culture and people. However, its identity pertains to the monumentality and timelessness of its architecture—parts which are preserved till date. Famed as the grid iron walled city, the Sher-e-Khas still reigns as one of the focal points of trade and activities. Even though the walls that surrounded the city have all but been destroyed, the monumental *darwazas* (gates) still exist and most of them have been fully restored or are undergoing restoration.

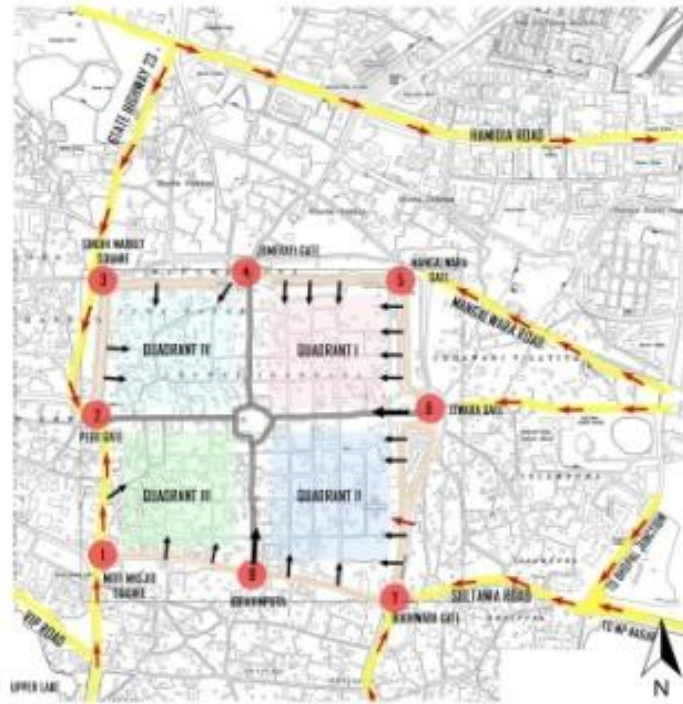


Fig. 3: Map of Sher-e-Khas

Source: Authors

Overtime, the city has flourished and has extended its confines beyond the old city. However, the aesthetics and cultural heritage of the urban fabric is predominantly within the limits of the old precinct. A thorough study of the area reveals how the precinct and its environs became the focal point of major societal and cultural transformations.

Urban environments are the main arena in which social and political groups activate, regenerate and participate. Public spaces in these urban environments often reflect the complexities of the society that inhabits it. In the current years, following increased urbanization and implementing planning policies directed toward infrastructure and transport rather than social cohesion and cultural preservation, public spaces have transformed from nodes of social participation to impersonal and fragmented urban environments.

The old city precinct has its share of landmarks which are of historic, religious and architectural significance. The Taj-ul-Masjid Mosque, The Taj Mahal palace (The royal home to the begums), The Benazeer palace, The Motiyatalaab, the Bab-e-Ali stadium, the Moti Masjid and the Jama Masjid which is situated in the center of the grid iron.

This historical layer has undeniably added a great deal of complexity and richness to the built-fabric of the city. Even if one walks through the city today, this history is omnipresent and contributes to the imaginations and the making of the image of the city. It is impossible to forget that one exists in the midst of the history, where monumentality and timelessness of its architecture plays a significant role endowed by the rulers such as the Begums who have worked tirelessly to modernize their state: Bhopal.

Sher-e-Khas as the CBD

Despite the fact that Sher-e-Khas is a historical precinct, today, it is also a part of the Central Business District of the modern city. By definition, a Central Business District (CBD) or a Central Activities District is the core of commercial, retail and culture of the city.

“There are no boundaries to the CBD. The CBD is essentially about perception. It is usually the "postcard image" one has of a particular city. There have been various attempts at delineating the boundaries of the CBD but, for the most part, one can visually or instinctively know when the CBD starts and ends as it is the core and contains a plethora of tall buildings, high density, a lack of parking, transportation nodes, a large number of pedestrians on the street and generally just a lot of activity during the daytime. The bottom line is that the CBD is what people think of a city when they think of its downtown area.”

Matt Rosenberg, 2025:1

In the past, the area around the Jama Masjid has been divided into four sectors in a grid iron plan and functions as the heart of all the commercial and cultural activities. The area subsequently has developed as a CBD during the final stage of the construction of Jama Masjid. The four large sectors had become market areas with large open spaces in and around the place. The uniqueness of this place lies in the fact that while the new developments of the city are closed by the night, this area thrives under the moonlight. During the phenomenological walk, it was experienced that the sights and sounds are deep and intense. The smell of biryani and korma wafts through the air—drifting out from the kitchens and spiraling through the architectural *jaalis*, right onto the bustling city streets. During the day, the city acts like any other marketplace: full of life, vibrant and colorful. Throngs of people surge through the area every day and have helped the district to grow. This symbiotic relationship has played a crucial role in keeping this place alive.

Today, a central business district would give the appearance of tall buildings of concrete, glass and steel revolving around sprawling open areas. Although not entirely similar to this image, modern commercial hubs like MP Nagar which had come up in the last decade haven't been able to develop a distinct identity like the old city. These hubs are what we can call 'edge cities'; concentrations of business and entertainment.

The old city precinct of Sher-e-Khas, however, has managed to stay true to its roots, preserving the culture and heritage of the place. A typical image of the place would consist of dense buildings with intricate *jaali* patterns and arches often punctuated by masjids and in some cases even temples. In spite of the grid planning, the place renders the image of a hap-hazarded market place bustling with crowd and activities. Numerous *gulleys* connect to the main road leading to more intricate pathways for shopping and eating. Small landmarks are made out of shops that have survived for a long time and have earned fame for their businesses. The business is huge and is supported by the large turnover of the place.

In spite of all the chaos, however, there is a distinct legibility that one may notice after walking through the exhausting number of streets. The placement of the shops is such that within the sectors, certain regions only sell one type of item. The bridal wear, *batua* and *Sherwanis* (famed for *zardosi* style) are all placed within one region while the *lohamarket* (ironsmiths) is all placed in another region.

Indeed, this strategic placement not only allows for easy navigation, but also imparts a distinct identity to areas within the precinct thereby improving the legibility of the place. While the millstone may have shifted to the newer hubs from the old city in the recent years; the character of the space is incomparable. Future revitalization plans of such an area will not only increase employment opportunities but may also help in bringing the community together and further bolster their identity as a dominant business district.

Needless to say the experience is one of jubilant chaos: a plethora of sounds, movements of people, colorfulness of the garments and the good sold add to the ambience.



Fig. 4: The jubilant chaos of the typical market streets of Sher-e-Khas;
Source: authors

Urban Morphology

The morphology of the city is dense with the grid layout and perpendicular circulation routes. The old city form is divided into four quadrants by the cardinal axes, but within each of these quadrants the built form inside is organic. The built to open ratio is 8:1. The only open spaces available are the circulation paths and a small area for congregation present at the center near the masjid. This intersection point of all the axes is the Chowk bazaar. In fact, the space becomes a community space for celebration. In the interiors due to the absence of such spaces the residents make use of the streets as an extension to their houses and a neighborhood space, while the courtyards become the personal spaces.



Fig. 5: Aerial view of Sher-e-Khas depicting its dense fabric
Source: authors

In order to delve into the city and its character, the exploration was broken into three parts, namely – physical revolving around the built fabric, the visual that involves the space and its experience and finally the life that thrives in that city with the activities that take place here.

Built Environment

The experience of the city tells us that the special physical attributes or features of this area would be its circulation routes: the streets, the gullies which lead to the main axes, the central Chowk with the Masjid flanked by its minarets, the soft edges of the residential buildings which blur the lines of private and public, the living urban realm - the open spaces and the frontages, the architecturally rich as well as diverse facades. All these physical elements contribute in their own way to add a special experience to the historic city.

In fact, the Sher- e- Khas has a grid layout with fine and even grains, at the centre of which lies the Jama Masjid. There are four cardinal axes which lead to the masjid. These streets are the primary access routes of the city. The street form and composition of the city is such that it is accessible from the upper lake and by traffic coming from the VIP road to the Moti masjid square.

BHOPAL: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION



Fig. 6: The Old city and its context
Source: authors

Notably, the cardinal axes have been designed as the ceremonial paths leading to masjid and Chowk bazaar which is situated deep in the heart of the city. These linear stretches have many perpendicular streets also called *gulleys* connecting them which provide accessibility to the residential area of Sher-e-Khas. The character of the built fabric enveloping the streets has a strong hand in the nature of the street itself. Since the buildings use predominant here is of mixed usage (the commercial on the ground floor and residential on the above two floors), the streets also show that character with informal markets extending out of the building frontage and groups of residents sitting outside and gossiping away. The streets therefore always have eyes on it and the city has a high sense of territoriality. This makes the space defensible and safe because it is active all the time. The narrow passageways with maximum width of 4m become a market, a parking area, an extension to the residences in the interiors of the city and for even the stray animals. In line with the busy nature of the commercial spines of old Bhopal, the carriageway is a hardscape with asphalt finish along with the only street furniture in this context being the extended plinths which act as urban void – a transition space from public to private ownership.

The physical fabric of the urban environments, generally considered to comprise of buildings, is used to describe the ‘urban’ character. Old cities are identified to have a ‘historical’ character, when the buildings reflect certain architectural or building styles from the past. Since these streets lie in the old city of Bhopal, their architectural styles tend to have an Islamic touch. With *jaali* work done on the ventilators and the windows. Beautiful wooden carved balconies belonging to a bygone era can be seen next to a new ACP and glass building, neither of which are properly maintained. In fact, some of them have undergone restoration and some have been re-constructed.

The physical features of the Sher-e-Khas creates and captures a sense of public space. The streets accommodate and encourage social interactions. According to Rapoport ‘the visual aspects are not always prominent or significant in the perception of cities’ (Rapoport 1977; 1992a; 1993). In contrast, this study shows that, here the visual element of the street is significant to the image of the market street. Rapoport also points out that the very first experience one may get of streets in India and bazaars is generally through the smells of food and incense, both non-visual characteristics. The different ethnic groups occupying the streets engaging in activities such as cooking, smoking, and playing music. Indeed, this observation applies well to this area. The honking of the autos, the ‘sale, sale’ call by the shopkeepers, the

smell of agarbatis, the hot piping samosas and the sweets fills the senses and are overpowering elements. All these features give the space a unique personal and welcoming personality as well as an unforgettable experience of organised chaos.

Visual Environment

The space has diversity, firstly due to the colourful shops of clothing, accessories and food. In fact, all this gives a different visual feel to the street. The various noises and smells of this bazaar street shout diversity. Secondly, it is the cultural diversity of having the same street used by the Muslims, Sindhis and Jains in a harmonious manner. The streets reflect the local culture or history with people flocking in on Fridays for *namaz* reading at the mosque, the culture of sharing is seen when two shopkeepers of different religions share a building for generations. Moreover, the Muslim, Hindu and Jain communities are involved in adding vitality to the street. The street comes to life during the temporal activities such as the festivals, parades, on street vendors and the hawkers. The unity of culture is felt when the street becomes the common ground to hold the Ganesh procession, the Eid celebrations and the Diwali festivities.

Adding to this, the physical and socio-cultural attributes of the area create a distinctive street ambience. The street has a sense of complementarity. The built and the open complement each other. Moreover, the physical and socio- cultural complement each other too. The built speaks of the culture through the architectural details seen in the street facades. The mutual sharing of spaces and the transmogrification that occurs over time is another peculiar character.

The axes are 50 meter in length which gives the whole circulation path a humanized scale. In fact, in these streets, one can see one of the main qualities of townscape mentioned by the noted urban designer Gordon Cullen (1961) which is the presence of gateways, closed vistas, projections, and the corners. Since the length is short and is linear, the closure of view isn't difficult. The street dimensions and the height of the building decide the sense of enclosure of a street. In this case, the street width is hardly 3m and it is surrounded by the densely packed three storied buildings. Thus, this street has a good sense of enclosure.



Fig. 8: Streets having high sense of enclosure
Source: Authors



Fig. 7: Sketch depicting the human scale felt in the city
Source: Authors

The building frontage has a sense of transparency, which is due to the enormous number of balconies and windows which open on to the street. The street is well defined due to its building walls which envelope it on both the sides. The proportions and scale are good; hence the overall space gets a sense of enclosure. The details on the façade of the building, and the front of the shops give qualities that engage the eyes of the customer. The environment of the street is physically comfortable due to the shading of spaces by the buildings. Overall, due to its form and the character, the street has a vibrant aura. The space transforms from just a street to a happening, lively, colourful market within minutes from the arrival of public in the morning. Interestingly, before that, the space is a playground for the *mohalla* kids whose houses surround the street.

The scale of the buildings, and their visual *permeability* at the street level seem to be an important contribution to the overall character of the street. The fixed elements, the semi-fixed elements and the non-fixed elements are also critical attributes. The street provides interesting visual experiences, particularly the vistas. Indeed, the closed vista of the street with Jama masjid at the end has become the postcard image of old Bhopal. The architecture of the buildings adds to the street's visual experience and public realm. They include the consistency of the scale between the buildings: the buildings are proportional to one another, and the fact that the buildings are designed and scaled for the pedestrians with a human scale.

Another visual element is the masjid at the centre which becomes a focal point for all movement. The minarets were built to act as visual magnets pulling the pedestrian, which in return would make the space legible and give a sense of orientation. As of today, the city has electric cables and tarpaulin overhangs which hinder the visual axis that emanates from the minarets. All these visual and physical elements render the city of its image, one of the places which are a commercial spine of old Bhopal and also are a vibrant public realm. People make the space a place and for that to happen the physical qualities help. This shows that the physical and visual and along with its socio-cultural layers which are interrelated.

Active Environment

Eid is how a local *Bhopali* narrates his experience of mutual coexistence of the multitude of festivals as a confluence of different religions in the walled city. This proves that the city becomes a melting pot of cultures and festivals. The old city of Bhopal is buzzing with life; it has a method to its madness and the charisma to its chaos that attracts the people towards it. The spaces are living urban places.

The distinctiveness of any place can be deliberated based on the distinctiveness of its cultural, social and architectural characters. In the case of the Sher-e-Khas, there are several underlying factors and activities that contribute to the overall distinct character of the place. The activities of the entire old city precinct itself contribute to the unique character of the place. For example, the *Mushayra* is held at Iqbal Maidan. The city was once referred to as Shehr-e-Gazal (the city of Gazals) which was held at both Public and private functions. The lakesides were often a favorite for these cherished activities.

The Chowk bazaar is located along the main cardinal axis of the historic walled city and is an important commercial center in the city. The bazaar is demonstrative of a vibrant and colorful public space bustling with pedestrian activity and a space which has been developed on traditional planning principles. The center of this bazaar is the point of intersection of the two cardinal axes at the Jami Masjid. Streets characterized by their diverse activities spread out from these cardinal axes into the four quadrants. It is in these inner streets that one may observe distinct social and cultural activities.

Presently, the pedestrian mobility in this bazaar is pejorative with the automobile conquering the street, leaving the pedestrians to squeeze his way through the interstitial mud path between the building and the road often having to jump in and around the vehicles breathing in their pollution. The condition of this narrow mud pedestrian path is no better being obstructed time and again by garbage bins overflowing with organic waste occasionally spilling onto the side walk in front of the shops. Parking of vehicles in public spaces that once hosted public activity and the continuous loud and heavy traffic has left the pedestrians with no place to pause and appreciate the architectural details or the essence of the space.

There is a need to rediscover these public spaces in conjunction with sustainable mobility parameters. A deeper retrospection of the major activity areas within the walled city, may shed light on areas to rediscover, improvise and develop. The main street that connects the peer gate to the Jama Masjid is the Lakerpura Road and is also the primary commercial street. This 47m stretch of asphalt finish road experiences the highest pedestrian footfall and is subject to regular maintenance. Enclosing the street is an envelope of buildings ranging from recent to almost a hundred years old.



Fig.9: living urban spaces of the old city;
source: authors

The Chowk bazaar and the adjoining *gulleys* are an example of a traditional public space that is dynamic, and is in need to constantly adapt to changes for its effective use as an urban public place. The activities in the public place change several times in a day to serve specific needs and gives way for effective usage of place. However, in the present context, it is apparent that the attractiveness of the bazaar as a public space has diminished. The heterogeneous nature of traffic creates a Choc-a-bloc situation which obstructs the free flow of the pedestrians, and the noise and air pollution of the area is disturbing and unauthorized parking at different places creates an eye sore and loss of valuable public spaces. However, the littering and waste disposal is another disturbing factor.

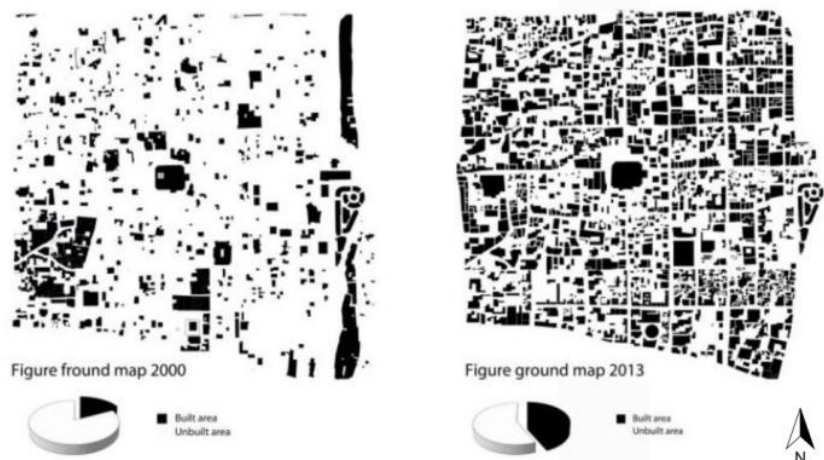


Fig. 10: Figure ground maps of the old city;
Source: Author

At various points, waste can be seen overflowing in heaps from the bins and polluting the surrounding, breeding filth and vermin. Moreover, heritage resources are in a state of neglect, infrastructural deficits are leading to unhygienic conditions of living, cultural aspects are given less importance and the space is less accessible for vulnerable populations.

These spaces within the old city of Bhopal have another very distinctive feature. They undergo a complete transmogrification every single day. In a day, the market streets and square here is open up for more than 18 hours. During this time, the public spaces change their character on an average three times. The Chowk bazaar has maximum temporal changes- from morning 6-8am it becomes a playground during school holidays for kids along with vegetable and the fruit market. For the next three hours, it is the opening of shops and prayer time in the

masjid. During the afternoons, this place transforms into a bustling market with formal as well as informal retail nodes popping up. However, the evening time is the most active with the area converting itself into a pandemonium. The shops are crowded, food kiosks open up with a string of customers, and vehicles try to make way. The scene depicts a productive chaos.

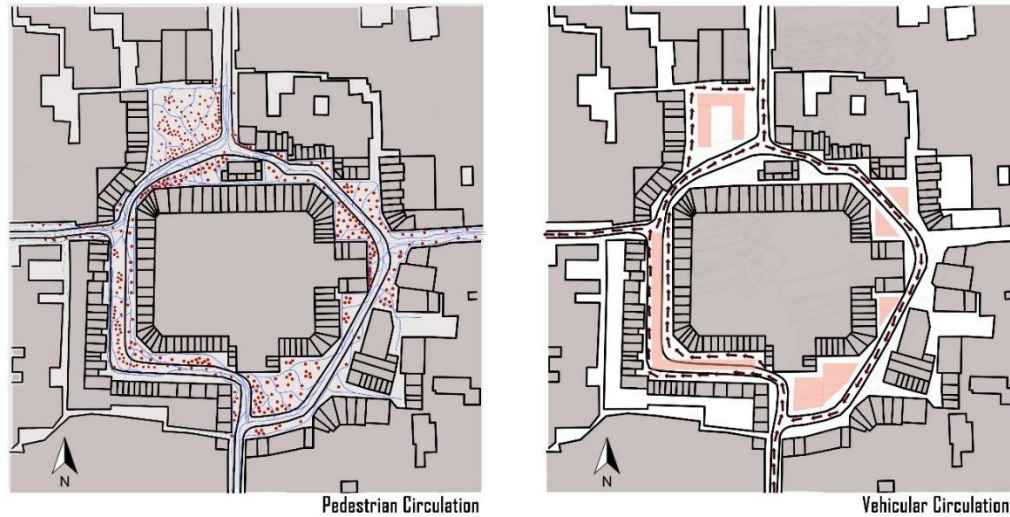


Fig. 11: Chowk Bazaar Activity mapping

Source: authors



Fig 12: Chowk bazaar during morning hours

Fig 13: The informal markets in chowk bazaar

Source: Authors

The streetscapes of Sher-e-Khas have a haptic geography. The person passing through this city is continuously imposed upon and challenged by diverse activities, sensations, and sights which render a state of variance and invigorate social engagement. Fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed physical elements are important components of the cultural landscape of a street and therefore are vital cultural expressions. These arrangements are results of very specific ways people interacting with the streets, based on their cultural background. That non-visual experiences are as significant as, and can even be more critical than, visual experiences in perceiving the character of an urban environment.

Analysis

As noted in the experiential findings of the city, the old city is not merely a commercial hub, but rather a widely and consistently used urban public place that reflects a social and cultural identity of Bhopal. The attributes of the perceptible character of this urban market,

then, can be summarized as the activities and the physical settings in which these activities take place, and thematic-sensory characteristics created as a result of the activities. They can also be called as the traditional market streets of Bhopal, with the high built/open ratio (density), colourful, magnetic, lively and public spectacle.

Attributes of Sher-e- Khas

Combining the elements of the city form (visual, built and active), one can arrive at the quality or feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of Sher-e-khas. These attributes which are tangible and intangible in nature then give the street its particular characteristics. Physical attributes are features that are primarily visually perceptible and generally measurable. These are tangible qualities of a cityscape. Socio-cultural attributes on the other hand, are the forces within the cultures and societies that affect the behavior of the people. Thus, with respect to a street, these are attributes which govern the feelings and behavior patterns of the people living or using that street. These can also be called the intangible qualities within a place.

Table 1: Tangible and intangible attributes seen in Sher- e-khas;
source: Authors

Tangible Attributes	Intangible Attributes
1. Facade design	1. Sensory
2. transport	2. User-Friendly
3.Streetscape and landscape	3. vitality
4.Safety	4. liveability
5.density	5. vibrancy
6. activity	6. aura
7. accessibility	7. Magnetivity

Conclusion

This paper examined ‘Sher-e- Khas’: an urban palimpsest of the walled city, Bhopal, India by experiencing its city spaces, bringing also to the surface the historical narratives present in the cityscape. It reveals that history is omnipresent in the streets and buildings fused with the experiential narratives unfolding through visuals, sounds, and scents, as much as the tactility of the surfaces.

It is noted that after the Sher-e-Khas, a new commercial and trade center has begun to emerge in the New Market area. With extensive local and outside businessmen setting up shop to do trade, the market has become a hub in itself with completely pedestrianized streets, narrow alleys and two main plazas. Although no distinct architectural styles can be observed (the buildings are merely pale imitations of modern buildings) the spirit of space is still intact in the sense that the density of the built fabric renders a very humane scale to the pedestrians. After this emerged the MP Nagar, full of concrete and glass buildings with a plethora of national and international brands, high-end cuisines and trading. The architecture too, swayed even more away from the roots. In an attempt to adopt the modernized look, Jaalis, and ornate doors have been replaced with minimalist windows, concrete facades and extensive use of glass. This goal to progressively achieve the western idea of modernism has put our society in a danger of becoming ‘mirror societies.’ These are societies in which we define ourselves through the activity of observing others. Where others are mirrors in which we see ourselves. The transfer of technology requires adaptation to the region, the unique situations and the customs. The Sher-e-Khas has the potential to be realized as a public space that has adapted to the changing needs of its people, yet remaining true to its roots (Kurokawa, 1994)

Keeping in mind the aspirations and needs of the people and public activities, revitalization or the regeneration of the Sher-e-Khas region would be an example of efficient urban public spaces that are rooted in the Indian culture and are designed for people of a specific place instead of encouraging designs that have been uprooted from urban landscapes elsewhere. After all, if history has to live with modernity, they should be compatible with each other. This does not mean that the design interventions in this place could be a prototype for old cities

elsewhere. However, the process of approaching the context and sensitivity to the culture and architecture can be extended to other parts of the country.

Every old city is different from each other. A strategy or intervention that brings considerable success in this city may not be successful in other cities. This is because each of these cities are unique, with a mixture of different factors shaping the fabric of the city. It is a physical entity of interwoven layers which has resulted in the unique identity of the place. A unique strategy has to be developed that also keeps the unique identity of the place intact.

Recommendations

The streets and public spaces of the Sher-e-Khas can be subject to a few improvisations for the benefit of a healthy public life. As mentioned earlier, streets that were built for pedestrian mobility have been taken over by automobiles pushing the public to approximately one meter space of mud path at the sides of the asphalt road. The large numbers of people visiting commuting through these streets often huddle the pedestrians into walking on the road and constantly trying to avoid collisions with vehicles. Certain sections within the walled city which have an active building façade could be made completely pedestrian by navigating the vehicular traffic on the periphery of the four quadrants, would effectively change the entire character and quality of the streets. Similarly, the meat shops dumping animal body parts in the garbage “area” and this garbage spilling over the full bin and onto the pedestrian path can be dealt with by introducing localized effective design strategies meant to deal with each section of the four quadrants in an individual and unique way due to the organic nature of the area. Since the streets are already divided on purpose, and all the shops of similar activities are more or less focused in a single area, a proper waste management system can be worked out for each section.

A lack of public spaces can be curbed by using interstitial spaces between buildings and the road, the walls and the street can be designed to compensate for public spaces and groups of activities and people can be distributed along an entire area. Revival of the old traditions of the old city such as patiyabazi etc. can be re-introduced by converting old abandoned buildings in each area into a public gathering area. Many old buildings in a dilapidated state are left unused and abandoned. They then develop into socially unsafe areas due to lack of activities. Renovating or rebuilding such places will not only bring a community together and revive the old traditions but will also make it a safer place to commute.

The visual experience of the streets can be enhanced by connecting all public spaces visually and functionally. The porosity of the street activity must be maintained – blocking active building façade with car parking etc. must be avoided to create mutually profiting areas. Barricades must be avoided on the streets for the benefit of any group of residents to keep the connect between various public areas and keep the fabric of the old city porous and the social fabric continuous and intact. Over all there is considerable scope for re vitalizing the entire area to be a more pedestrian friendly space by small scale interventions and policies.

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Availability of Data:

This paper presents only some of the data produced through this research. However, most of the data generated is available for scrutiny and can be provided upon request.

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